

NY Senators & Tri-State Reps. Seek Answers from Bush Administration Following Resignation of 9/11 Health Task Force Chair

Wednesday, 05 September 2007

Washington, D.C. — Following Dr. John Agwunobi's resignation on September 4th as Chair of the Bush Administration's 9/11 Health Task Force, Senators Charles Schumer (D-NY) and Hillary Clinton (D-NY) and Reps. Carolyn Maloney (D-NY), Jerrold Nadler (D-NY), Vito Fossella (R-NY), Ed Towns (D-NY), Christopher Shays (R-CT) and Frank Pallone (D-NJ) today wrote to Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Michael Leavitt and asked if he intends to name a replacement for Dr. Agwunobi in the near future. In their letter the lawmakers also asked when HHS intends to release its plan to medically monitor and treat everyone exposed to toxins released by the collapse of the World Trade Center towers.

"The Administration needs to fully fund without further delay the health care, treatment, and testing of the thousands of selfless first responders who didn't hesitate for a moment to answer our nation's call for help in the days, weeks, and months after 9/11," said Senator Schumer. "With the sixth anniversary of 9/11 fast approaching, the federal government must step up to the plate and give these heroes the help and support they need and deserve."

"This Administration continues to let our first responders down. We have seen government officials come and go while thousands of people still suffer. Our 9/11 heroes deserve a real commitment from the Federal government, rather than empty promises and musical chairs. I hope that Secretary Leavitt will not allow personnel changes to prevent him from coming to us very soon with a solid, comprehensive commitment to our ailing Ground Zero workers, volunteers, area residents, office workers and students," Senator Clinton said.

"Six years after 9/11, with thousands sick and many dead from Ground Zero toxins, the Administration still has no plan, no one in charge, and no answers," said Congresswoman Maloney. "I am disappointed that the Administration's 'point man' on 9/11 health is taking off for a job with Wal-Mart without delivering a federal 9/11 health plan. We will not rest until we have in place a comprehensive federal program to monitor everyone exposed to the toxins and treat anyone who's sick as a result."

"The Bush Administration is asleep at the switch," said Rep. Nadler. "While thousands continue to suffer from the health consequences of 9/11, Dr. Agwunobi failed to get the 9/11 Health Task Force to act. Now, he is leaving the Administration with little to show for his efforts. President Bush and Secretary Leavitt need to exercise true leadership now and finally provide for the health care needs of first responders, residents, area workers, and school children affected by the collapse of the World Trade Center."

Rep. Fossella said, "It is important that a replacement be appointed quickly to ensure there is continuity and no lapse in Dr. Agwunobi's work. The need for a federal plan of action grows more important every day as responders and residents fall ill as a result of the breathing the air at Ground Zero. Our nation's unsung heroes have waited too long already for the federal government to develop a plan to ensure that everyone exposed to these toxins have access to monitoring and treatment."

"Once again the incompetence of this Administration is revealed," said Congressman Towns. "There's no plan in place and to add insult to injury, there is now a lapse in personnel since the former Assistant Secretary for Health decided the grass was greener at Wal-Mart."

"Nearly six years after the cataclysmic attacks on the World Trade Center, shock waves still emanate from Ground Zero. Diverse and delayed health problems continue to emerge in those exposed to the contaminants and psychological

stressors unleashed on September 11, 2001. First responders and residents exposed to toxins need effective care and they, regrettably, have not yet gotten it. It's time for a comprehensive plan to provide monitoring, treatment and support," said Congressman Shays.

"Six years of administration foot dragging must end," Pallone said. "The Bush administration needs to finally prioritize the health of 9/11 rescue and recovery workers by quickly replacing Dr. Agwunobi and finalizing the WTC Task Force recommendations. We need a plan in place so that we can help treat and monitor these workers who accepted the call to serve their nation after its darkest day."

Background

In a meeting with lawmakers last year, Secretary Leavitt announced that he was creating a 9/11 Health Task Force chaired by Dr. Agwunobi, then the Assistant Secretary for Health. In January 2007, the New York-area delegation received word that the Administration had included \$25 million for 9/11 health issues in the President's Fiscal Year 2008 budget. At that time, Administration officials told the lawmakers that this funding was a "placeholder," or down payment, until Dr. Agwunobi's Task Force finalized its plan on how much additional funding would be needed. Though the Administration stated that its plan would be completed by February 2007, it has yet to share any plan with Congress or the American public.

In April 2007, Sens. Schumer and Clinton and Reps. Maloney, Nadler, Fossella, Towns and Shays sent a joint letter to Secretary Leavitt after Dr. Agwunobi refused in testimony before Congress and in correspondence to provide further information on the Administration's plan. To date, the delegation members have not received a response from Secretary Leavitt.

The text of the letter from the NY Senators and Tri-State Reps to Secretary Leavitt follows:

"We write in response to the recent resignation of Dr. John Agwunobi as Assistant Secretary for Health. As part of his duties, Dr. Agwunobi served as the chair of the World Trade Center (WTC) Task Force. We would urge you to use the occasion of his departure to evaluate the work of the WTC Task Force and take action to address the pressing health care needs of those experiencing 9/11-related illnesses.

As stated in an April 27, 2007 letter to you - to which we have yet to receive a response - it is our understanding that on April 3, 2007, the WTC Task Force chaired by Dr. Agwunobi presented its recommendations to you regarding the federal government's plan to treat and monitor individuals whose health was compromised by the toxins of Ground Zero. With the sixth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks fast approaching, we are deeply concerned that Dr. Agwunobi resigned before your department finalized this plan and released it to Congress and the American people. We are likewise concerned that you have yet to announce Dr. Agwunobi's replacement to lead the WTC Task Force.

The number of ailing 9/11 rescue and recovery workers is increasing, workers' illnesses are becoming more severe, the projected cost of treating these illnesses is surging, and current federal treatment funding levels are likely inadequate. Given the urgency of this situation, we ask that you meet with us as soon as possible to answer the following questions:

- 1) What is your timeline for naming a new chair of the WTC Task Force?
- 2) What is the timeline for your department to develop a plan to address the monitoring and treatment needs of those

exposed to the toxins at Ground Zero? When will such plan be made available to Congress and the public?

Once again, we ask that you schedule a meeting with us as soon as possible to answer these questions and to help ensure that federally-funded 9/11 health treatment and monitoring programs have the resources they need to provide appropriate, long-term support to those affected by World Trade Center exposures."

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